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Dialogical perceptiveness of authenticity in the third space: implications for wellbeing and sustainability

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Scholars, from multiple disciplines, remain captivated by the authenticity phenomenon as the appeal of authenticity continues to soar. Authenticity is generally understood to be something that is true/original and confirmed by history and the native people. This criterion is considered the most popular point of reference for assessing the quality of tangible heritage tourism (Dutton, 2003; Chhabra, 2021b). This implies that authenticity has to go through a verification process and therefore, “it is not a property of entities but, instead, a claim that is made by or for (them)..... and either accepted or rejected by relevant others” (Peterson, 2005, p. 1086). In other words, from a social and behavioral sciences standpoint, individual, shared, or authentic objects, actually “are what they appear to be or claimed to be” (Trilling, 1972, p. 92). In this sense, authenticity attributions rely mostly on an “an entity in one’s environment (e.g., object, person, performance) that is perceived to be true or can be matched up with something else,” (Moulard et al., 2021, p. 99). The need for holding a pedestal has led scholars to scrutinize authentication processes that determine authentic criteria or hold power to shape its process. Authentication, therefore, resembles a truth-seeking process (Kreuzbauer and Keller, 2017). Several scholars have questioned if any object, site, or experience can be objectively (or purely) authentic (Wang, 1999; Yi et al., 2022). It has been postulated that the nearest accomplishment can exist in the third space (Soja, 1998; Zhang et al., 2023). The third space, is, an interlinkage of signifiers, daily rituals, and natural and built landscapes and these collectively shape authenticity perceptions and existential state of mind (Soja, 1996, 1998). Such spaces represent an evolving “beingness” in a tangible setting whose reality can remain in a state of flux (Maegaard and Karrebæk, 2019). The “beingness” and tangible landscapes form a part of space in contesting or harmonious permutations. As elaborated by Wilson (2000), our backstage can make us alien to ourselves when we start viewing ourselves through the eyes of the “other”. Furthermore, an objectively authentic backstage can continue to evolve albeit remain elusive and enigmatic (Maegaard and Karrebæk, 2019).

A handful of studies have accorded particular focus to theoplicity and existentialist authenticity and their relationship with moral selving, sustainability, transformation, and wellbeing (Mkono, 2020; Chhabra, 2021a,b). In fact, much discourse centering around authenticity, in the post-covid times, refers to the association between authenticity and sustainability and/or wellbeing (Yi et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2023). A handful of studies have examined authenticities in the third space from a wellbeing standpoint. As an instance, Zhang et al. (2023) explore authentic wellbeing in the third space by focusing on the Chinese tourists who enjoy the traditional Hanfu attire. The authors examine if the Hanfu costume experience, by tourists, contributes to their authentic wellbeing. They adopt the third space theory and the PERMA model of positive psychology (wellbeing) to investigate the effects of wearing Hanfu attire on the psychological wellbeing of tourists.

Somewhat aligned with the aforementioned, is an emerging trajectory that probes deeper into the notion and potential of transformative tourism for the optimal functioning of the human ecological systems (Linley et al., 2006). It relates to conscious and mindful behavior toward the other and the planet while simultaneously focusing on the self and its psychological/spiritual advancement (Brown, 2013; Sheldon, 2020; Chhabra, 2021a). A growing number of tourism studies have emerged that are centered around positive psychology in the context of self-efficacy, self-determination, and the flourishing or transformed self-inspiring “profound self-change,” “revitalized sense of self” and “optimal flow” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). For instance, Saunders et al. (2013) use the PERMA theory of flourishing and wellbeing to garner support for lasting self-efficacy and personal growth. A handful of these studies hint at the third space and its potential to optimize self-actualization and mindful consciousness toward persevering in sustainable behavior. These schools of thought privilege authenticity as a state of mind and posit that within one’s own self, one can achieve an optimal flow or a sense of completeness or transcendence.

The pedestal for the self and its authentication in the third space remains, for the most part, an unexplored line of inquiry. One can begin with Soja’s collection of essays which facilitate a novel way of conceptualizing spaces and spatiality (Merrifield, 1999). According to Soja (1989), the first space is the visual tangible space which denotes the real contour of a space. The second space is a space that is constructed through a variety of emotions and represents the meaning of life, for instance, virtual space produced by tourist imaginations. Last, the third space is a dichotomous embodiment of perceived actuality and imagined virtuality in the same space (Soja, 1989). In the third space, both subjects and objects coexist, that is, it is the realm where consciousness and practice interact. Soja revisits how spaces and spatiality are conceived and stresses the important role of spaces in shaping human lives in the contemporary world. According to him, “one of the major obstacles to this rethinking is the practice whereby space is simply added on to history and the social as an afterthought” and he seeks to “to give spatial conceptions an equal primacy as the ‘third existential dimension’ (Soja, 1989, p. 53)”. Summarizing Soja’s (1989) work, Atkinson writes:

This necessitates the introduction of the “third space” notion. Soja’s rethinking draws heavily upon what he describes as radical postmodernist thought and its critique of conventional epistemology/ontology which involves a rejection of totalizing metanarratives and a questioning of the whole modernist project. However, he does not wish to simply dismiss modernism but to construct a critical tension between postmodernism and modernism out of which will emerge a new synthesis—this is the domain of third space where simplistic antagonistic dualism are transcended, what he terms “thirding-as-Othering” or trialectics. Third space builds upon first space, where history and the social are dominant and the spatial is peripheral, and second space, which stresses that reality be understood via “imagined representations”; it is the domain in which spatiality comes into its own as a genuinely constitutive element in the structuring of the world (Soja, 1996, p. 137).

In other words, it is about placing spaces in a contemporary context and prompting new ways of viewing. Soja (1996) shares the notion of the “Exopolis—‘the city without,’ without a center where every space is central and where multiple spaces co-exist” (Soja, 1998). Lefebvre (1976) opines that although human beings construct spaces where they build their lives, this process is impacted by multiple out-of-reach forces such as “history, social and cultural structures, etc.” Therefore, the “space is not simply inherited from nature, or passed on by the dead hand of the past, or autonomously determined by ‘laws’ of spatial geometry as per conventional location theory. Space is produced and reproduced through human intentions, even if unanticipated consequences also develop, and even as space constrains and influences those producing it” (Stewart, 1995, p. 618). Space, hence, is not merely a platform or a collage of elements/attributes but it is an interconnected form embodied by symbolic markers and daily life practices.

The existentialist self in such third spaces constitutes a notable line of inquiry. As Heideggerian ideology points out, existential authenticity is experienced when a person portrays his or her novel self in ideal/preferred situations or unique settings. Moore et al. (2021) write that a person’s individuality is shaped by his or her heritage (experienced or inherited) and it might not resonate with the collective ideology of the society where the person is situated. The authors further postulate that “the self that acts authentically is not some fixed ‘thing’ but a dynamic activity continuously formed—or forged and re-forged—out of authentic acts. These acts give rise to momentary and elusive experiences of authenticity for the tourist. In this analysis, existential authenticity is an experience of unique individuality, fleetingly and tantalizingly experienced within a massive ocean of ‘they-ness’” (Moore et al., 2021) or the third space, the place to experience optimal authenticity (Zhu et al., 2023). The third space notion calls for synergies between the modern, post-modern, and contemporary (post-postmodern) ideologies (Canavan and McCamley, 2021). This dialectic negotiated stance of authenticity, vacillating between psychological/physiological/local/global production of space, from a tourism standpoint, can be noted in the work of some recent scholars (Sutton, 2020; Canavan and McCamley, 2021; Zhang et al., 2023).

Sutton (2020) argues that all dimensions of authenticity can be meaningfully connected and calls for a bigger view of authenticity. It is argued that the holistic or synergistic view can be better examined in a shared third space. Akin to this, Canavan and McCamley (2021) propose a dialogue that spans ideologies across three modernity realms: modernism, postmodernism, and post-postmodernism. According to the authors, “modernism involves constructive, objective and verisimilitude stances for negotiating authenticity and inauthenticity, including by tourists through tourism. Postmodernism takes more deconstructive, subjective, and hyperreal stances. Post-postmodernism meanwhile, implies reconstructive, performative, and alterreal stances” (Canavan and McCamley, 2021, p. 1). The post-postmodernism realm aligns with the third space.

The modernities model facilitates a more nuanced concept and comprehension of authenticity in a vacillating negotiated form. Rose and Wood (2005) describe authenticity as a process that

involves negotiation of its inherent paradoxes and requires coping, resolution, or creative approaches to overcome anxieties rooted in unavoidable frustrations; this can be attributed to the fact that what is existentially authentic is transitory thereby opening a forum for inquiries that question existing representations and meanings and opening up a ground for negotiation. In fact, the “post-postmodern reconstruction may be an alternative to modern and post-modern approaches to authenticity, both of which contain limitations, and therefore offer an alternative and altogether more nuanced means of pursuing authenticity through travel” (Canavan and McCamley, 2021, p. 8).

It is unlikely that any single approach toward authenticity can be especially satisfying given the uncertainties, paradoxes, and transience of authenticity and its dialectic alienation, as outlined in existential philosophy. However, such challenges encourage dialogical perceptiveness. Post- postmodernism extends the current conceptualization of how tourists engage with authenticity through tourism despite its inherent paradoxes. Combined with modern and postmodern schools of thought, these three positions collectively offer a more holistic negotiated stance on authenticity and its many vexations. Particularly tourists are more likely to embrace all perspectives to spontaneously and simultaneously negotiate their self-authenticities and those of the objects/environment adjacent to them. All these dynamics will continue to ignite and breathe life into the different realms of authenticity making them viable and interconnected through alternative or shared third spaces. The alternative proposed by the post-postmodern school of thought can be initialized in third-space settings where optimal negotiable configurations are possible.

There appears to be tremendous potential for a more nuanced debate on negotiated authenticity in the “third space” probing into deeper impressions that hold the potential to champion a higher sense of consciousness and a sustained transformation of the enlightened self. The time is ripe for a deeper scrutiny of pursuing these lines of inquiry in third space realms. Socio-cultural shifters in the face of the pandemic and the wars in Ukraine and Israel/Palestine have ignited observable links between new thinking about the self, wellbeing of self, and others in alternative spaces. Sheldon (2020) inspired reflections on “the deeper purposes of self-realization and self- exploration that motivate transformational

travel” thereby prompting deliberations on alternative synergistic spaces to inspire paths toward holistic wellbeing. Soja’s concept of third space adds illustrative weight to authentic selving, wellbeing, and sustainability while drawing from a cross-fertilization of theories related to sociology, health, positive psychology, and tourism studies. I invite research or reflection notes or a full paper exploring the “*dialogical perceptiveness of authenticity in the third space: implications for wellbeing and sustained transformation*” for the “Cultural Heritage and Authenticity in Tourism” section.

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